

**Abstract 443**

**TITLE:** Women of Color Doing It for Ourselves: HIV Prevention Policies

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**ISSUE:** As of June 1998, the CDC reported that Black and Hispanic women represent less than 25% of the U.S. population yet account for 80% of women with AIDS. There is little dispute that women of color are the fastest growing group of new HIV infections. Yet there are still no comprehensive HIV prevention policies, interventions or strategies to address the specific needs of women. The gender disparities that impact our society are well established and pervasive but in the context of public health policy they are deadly.

**SETTING:** Women of color affected by HIV/AIDS, service providers, and policymakers who are engaged in or interested in creating HIV prevention policies.

**PROJECT:** Voices of Women of Color Against HIV/AIDS (VOW) was formed in 1995 to increase the involvement of women of color in all aspects of the efforts against the HIV epidemic. Formulating prevention policy is one of VOW's primary goals. In that respect VOW engages women of all educational, economic and social backgrounds who meet monthly to discuss HIV/AIDS issues. Topics identified by the women include newborn testing, partner notification, inclusion of women in medical research, and the process of advocacy. VOW organizes training on these topics in order to give women a comprehensive understanding of the issues.

**RESULTS:** These initiatives have greatly empowered the women. They have identified gaps and needs in current prevention policies, given public testimony, met with legislators, drafted commentary on pending legislation, represented VOW at community prevention planning groups, written letters in response to government budget cuts, and met with local officials. VOW's work to date culminated in our organizing a New York City women's conference (with an HIV prevention policy focus) reaching over 250 women of color. The conference further established VOW as a leader in HIV/AIDS gender issues and prevention policies targeting women of color.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** VOW's experience has proven that when women are educated and given the tools to act on their own behalf they are effective leaders. This workshop will facilitate a discussion around how to help women assume leadership, especially in the male-dominated public health arena. We will give specific examples on how to develop topics for prevention policy setting; best practices for women-centered training; and strategies on approaches women can take to advocate for and develop better prevention policies.

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